

**THE MODERN NOVELISTS OF
RUSSIA: BEING THE SUBSTANCE
OF
SIX LECTURES DELIVERED AT THE
TAYLOR INSTITUTION, OXFORD**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649391547

The modern novelists of Russia: being the substance of six lectures delivered at the Taylor Institution, Oxford by Charles Edward Turner

Except for use in any review, the reproduction or utilisation of this work in whole or in part in any form by any electronic, mechanical or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including xerography, photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, is forbidden without the permission of the publisher, Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd, PO Box 1576 Collingwood, Victoria 3066 Australia.

All rights reserved.

Edited by Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd.
Cover @ 2017

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, re-sold, hired out, or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form or binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

www.triestepublishing.com

CHARLES EDWARD TURNER

**THE MODERN NOVELISTS OF
RUSSIA: BEING THE SUBSTANCE
OF
SIX LECTURES DELIVERED AT THE
TAYLOR INSTITUTION, OXFORD**

THE
MODERN NOVELISTS
OF
RUSSIA

*BEING THE SUBSTANCE OF SIX LECTURES
DELIVERED AT THE TAYLOR INSTITUTION, OXFORD*

BY
CHARLES EDWARD TURNER
ENGLISH LECTOR IN THE UNIVERSITY OF ST. PETERSBURG

LONDON
TRÜBNER & CO., LUDGATE HILL

1890

LONDON :
PRINTED BY THE HANSARD PUBLISHING UNION, LIMITED,
GREAT QUEEN STREET, W.C.

THE MODERN NOVELISTS OF RUSSIA.

LECTURE I.

IVAN ALEXANDROVITCH GONCHAROFF.

THE Russian novel did not easily, or till within a comparatively recent period, obtain its right of citizenship in the world of letters. The purists of the eighteenth century were ill-disposed to allow the claim of the novelist to rank with the dramatist or poet; whilst the Church sharply denounced romances as injurious and prejudicial to public morality. "From the reading of novels," writes Sumarokoff, the great literary authority of those days, and the founder of the modern Russian theatre, "we can get little good and risk getting much harm. We have no right to call it an amusement, it is rather a hurtful waste of time." An anonymous pamphleteer of the same period, whose fierceness of style perhaps justifies us in supposing him to have been an ecclesiastic, condemns romances as being "the

deadliest of all the weapons employed by the devil against the soul of man." If we turn to the novels themselves, we find them to be irredeemably dull, and their extremely limited number, seldom more than two or three a year being published in the whole of Russia, would betoken an indifference on the part of the public that makes it difficult to understand how they ever could have provoked such bitter hostility. When not direct translations from the French, they were closely modelled on Fénélon or Scarron, and accordingly were either sermons in the form of fiction, as edifying as they were tedious, or else portrayals of a life that had nothing in common with the habits and traditions of the Russian people.

As the earlier stages of Russian civilisation are marked by the bitter struggle of two opposing parties for pre-eminence, the one desirous to impress a new and foreign-exported social code upon the people, the other zealous to preserve, as far as possible, untouched the national life and traditions of the past; so, in the history of Russian literature we observe, from its very commencement, two like conflicting elements. In spite of his heavy, monotonous, unformed style, Kantemier, the first in point of date of Russian poets, has given us in his nine satires a faithful picture of the manners and

belief of his times, and it is in their nationality that their true, it may be their only, value resides. Even when imitating the satires of Horace, Juvenal, or Boileau, he never fails to accommodate these imitations to the necessities of Russian life. The vices he exposes are not the vices of a past or foreign civilisation, but those which stained the society of his own age and country. He chiefly attacks those of his countrymen who, unable to comprehend the full significance and bearing of the reforms inaugurated by Peter, and still further carried out by Catherine, idly imagined that they were aiding the cause of progress by aping foreign customs, copying the fashions of Western Europe, and heartily despising everything Russian. Unfortunately, his rude diction and still ruder versification did not allow Kantemier to become a model for the writers who followed him, and the place of literary lawgiver was reserved for his more illustrious contemporary, Lomonosoff, who exchanged the dull syllabic metre hitherto exclusively employed for a richer and more varied form of verse, and who gave a new life to the Russian language by freeing it from archaic barbarisms and endowing it with a constructive polish and grace it had never known before. Seeing that his predecessors taught him nothing except what

he had better avoid, and unable to find in them any sure foundation whereon to build, it is only natural that Lomonosoff should have gone to foreign sources for his inspiration. Consequently, his poems are little more than transcripts of French or German thought and expression, are marked by a complete absence of originality, abound with stereotyped pseudo-classical figures of speech, which, from constant repetition, had lost whatever meaning they once possessed, and are thoroughly non-Russian in spirit and tone.

The persistency with which these classical affectations maintained their hold in Russian literature is best to be seen in the works of those writers who, following the example set by Kantemier, tried to bring poetry and the novel into close and direct union with the cares and hopes of the actual world around them. We may select, by way of example, Karamsin's once famous, now almost forgotten, romance, "Poor Louisa." It is evidently modelled on Richardson's "Pamela," for which Karamsin always expressed the warmest admiration, declaring its author to be "the most artistic painter of man's moral nature." But though it pretends to be a story of humble life, the writer carefully adheres to the literary traditions of his age. The poor peasant girl is made to talk and act

like a fine heroine, her conversation is couched in a style as far as possible removed from the language of ordinary people, and she perpetually indulges in high-flown gushing tirades which would scarcely be tolerated in the most sentimental of melodramas. Old modes of speech, that had long been banished from daily conversation, and were reserved solely for official documents, and bookish forms of words, supposed to have a solemnity which would be wanting to them if presented in their ordinary shape, are put into the mouths of peasants, who, in real life, would never think of employing them. But we must not blame the novelist for thus idealising his characters. In so doing he but satisfied the tastes of his epoch. Nor should we forget that exactly those portions of the tale which offend us as being unnatural and lachrymose, won from contemporary critics the warmest praise and loudest applause. It was a bold venture to select for his subject the fate of a common peasant family, but at least its members had to be washed, combed, and well dressed before they could be judged worthy to excite the interest and gain the sympathy of polite and cultured readers.

What I have just said of Karamsin applies equally to his immediate successors, who, whilst